

# When in the Course of Human Events Does Civil Disobedience Become Necessary?

By John M. Frame

In general, civil disobedience becomes necessary when the civil law stands in the way of a moral obligation. For Christians (I can write only from a Christian point of view, for my heart belongs to Jesus), moral obligations come ultimately from God. Thus, civil disobedience is necessary when there is a conflict between the law of God and the laws of human beings. There are many examples of this in the Bible (it is illuminating to study in this connection Exod. 1:15-20; Josh. 2; Dan. 3, 6; Acts 4:18-20; 5:27-32,40-42). In most cases, to be sure, Scripture urges Christians to be good citizens, obedient to the ruling authorities (Matt. 22:15-22; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17), but in cases of conflict "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Now, the Bible also calls us to "rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter" (Prov. 24:11-12). We have, then, a moral obligation to rescue those who are being unjustly deprived of life. Consider what a difference it would have made in Nazi Germany if Christians had united to keep this commandment. But in our own time, the number of abortions exceeds one million per year. This is a truly unprecedented slaughter of innocent human life. Surely, our obligation to rescue babies transcends our obligation to respect trespassing laws. If civil disobedience is ever justified, then surely it is justified in this case.

To be sure, many still resist our equation between fetuses and babies. But the scientific and biblical evidence is all on our side. From the moment of conception, the unborn child is a genetically distinct individual. He or she is *not* "part of his mother's body." The child is, of course, *dependent* on the mother; but so is a five year old. As for Scripture, it speaks of unborn children using the same vocabulary in which it speaks of persons already born (Pss. 51:5; 139:15ff.). God's law protects the unborn very specifically (Exod. 21:21-25). Is anyone still in doubt? Then former president Ronald Reagan's remark is apt: "When there is doubt, choose in favor of life." If I am shooting rabbits, and I am in doubt as to whether a rustle in the bushes is a rabbit or a child, do I have the right to pull the trigger? Certainly not. Even in doubt, I must choose life. And in the face of (to say the least) the great probability that abortion is killing a baby, if we choose to kill anyway, we will surely have to answer for much.

Others accept our equation between unborn and born, but they resist the use of civil disobedience in this context. Operation Rescue is non-violent, but might not its arguments be used to justify violent civil disobedience as well? The answer of Operation Rescue is that if our goal is saving babies, we must choose the methods that will save the most lives in the long run. They argue that non-violent methods are superior to violent ones for that purpose. That is debatable in my mind, and the reference to the "long run" raises a further point of debate: Are we sure that non-violent civil disobedience is a better method *long term* than, say, lawful political action or education? Operation Rescue believes these latter methods have not worked and will not work in the future; others may be unsure. But even those who question whether Operation Rescue's tactics are the very best possible ought to support the Operation Rescue protesters by prayer and by insisting on just treatment for them. Operation Rescue reports that an early "rescuer" was given a five year prison term because she refused to recant her beliefs! On the same day, the same judge gave four year sentences to two accessories to murder. Even those who worry that Operation Rescue's tactics are not the best should oppose such injustice. Even when rescue is strategically questionable, it is still, in my view, morally justified.